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Twiki from *Buck Rogers*: A Deep-Dive into His Human Creators and Performers

Origins of Twiki's Character

Twiki is the small, wise-cracking robot (an "ambuquad") introduced in the 1979 film and TV series *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*. The show's developers, **Glen A. Larson** and **Leslie Stevens**, created Twiki as a new character to serve as Buck's personal assistant and comic sidekick [1] [2]. This was in line with late-'70s sci-fi trends of adding endearing robotic companions – much like *Star Wars* had R2-D2/C-3PO – to lighten the tone of futuristic adventure. In fact, Twiki initially communicated only in chirpy "bidi-bidi-bidi" noises (translated by the computer Dr. Theopolis he carried), but producers soon realized this felt too similar to the R2-D2/C-3PO dynamic and gave Twiki actual English dialogue as the film went on [3]. From the start, Twiki provided humor and heart: in one early scene he quips that he's "freezing his ball bearings" when out in a cold wasteland [4], a line that perfectly illustrates the show's mix of campy humor and sci-fi peril. Larson and the writers intentionally wrote Twiki with 20th-century slang and sass (picked up from Buck Rogers himself) to make the 25th-century world feel more familiar and fun [5]. This approach paid off – Twiki quickly became one of the show's most memorable characters, adding levity to Buck's adventures.

Designing and Creating the Twiki Suit

Bringing Twiki from script to screen was a creative effort blending costume design and practical effects. The task of designing Twiki's look fell to the show's costume department, headed by **Jean-Pierre Dorléac** (an award-winning costume designer also known for *Battlestar Galactica*). Dorléac's team created Twiki's distinctive diminutive robot body, reportedly aiming to make him resemble a "small boy with a bowl haircut" in robotic form [6]. The resulting suit was a shiny, small-framed humanoid robot with an oversized round head, wide eyes and a gaping mouth – a design that managed to be cute, if a bit odd (one critic jokingly noted Twiki's head shape had an *ahem* anatomical resemblance) [7]. Twiki's costume was constructed largely of lightweight fiberglass pieces that snapped together around the actor [3]. This rigid shell gave Twiki a hard "machine" appearance on camera. Internally, however, it was no high-tech automaton – just a very warm suit for the person inside. According to the actor who wore it, each fiberglass section took several minutes to assemble, and once sealed in, it became *"hot as a sauna"* during filming [3]. There were small fans or vents to help, but the performer often needed to have Twiki's head removed between takes to get air. The fiberglass also limited mobility, so Twiki's movements were kept simple – a signature waddle and arm gestures – adding to his charm.

Because of heavy use (and presumably some wear-and-tear from action scenes), multiple Twiki suits were made for the series [8]. The core design stayed consistent through the show's run, though minor tweaks were made for Season 2. Notably, in the second season Twiki sometimes sported a little yellow backpack-like power unit, and he eventually got a new robot friend/rival (the taller, talkative robot Crichton) on the *Searcher* starship – but Twiki's own look remained the familiar pint-sized silver ambuquad fans knew and loved.

The Actors Inside Twiki's Metal Shell

Portraying Twiki physically on screen was a demanding job entrusted primarily to actor and stuntman **Felix Silla**. Standing just under 4 feet tall, Silla fit perfectly into Twiki's 3-foot-11-inch robot frame [8]. He performed **Twiki's body and movements in nearly every episode**, giving the robot its personality through pantomime and timing. Silla was already a veteran of costumed roles – he had famously played Cousin Itt on *The Addams Family* – so he was no stranger to acting from inside elaborate outfits [9]. As Twiki, Silla developed the robot's endearing physicality: the jaunty gait, the way Twiki would tilt his head or offer a metallic "hand" for a high-five. He often had to do these things with very limited vision and no audible dialogue on set. (During filming, an assistant would read Twiki's lines off-camera as cues, since Silla's own voice wasn't used in the final character [10] [11].) Silla later recalled that playing Twiki was both fun and challenging – the suit could be stifling, and he had to communicate a lot with simple gestures – but he poured his personality into the role. Many of Twiki's cute habits, like cocking his head or enthusiastic "gimme five" hand gestures, were touches Silla used to make the robot friendlier [5].

However, Silla wasn't the only person to don the Twiki suit. **Patty Maloney**, an actress of similar small stature, served as a **Twiki double in three episodes** [12]. Maloney stepped in when Silla was unavailable or when two robot characters appeared at once. For example, in the Season 1 episode "Cruise Ship to the Stars," Maloney actually appeared as *"Tina"*, a robot waitress who looks identical to Twiki (she portrayed Tina in that episode and later filled in as Twiki himself in a couple of others) [13] [14]. In one spooky episode "Space Vampire," it was Maloney inside Twiki's suit, scuttling nervously through a dark space station while a monster stalks the crew [13]. Viewers never noticed a difference – a credit to Maloney's and Silla's skill in uniformly bringing Twiki to life. Both performers were under 4 feet tall and experienced with physical character roles, so Twiki remained consistent. Maloney, like Silla, had a background in fantasy and sci-fi projects (she even played an Ewok child in the *Star Wars Holiday Special*), which prepared her for Twiki's physical demands. While Felix Silla was the primary Twiki, Patty Maloney's contributions ensured the ambuquad never missed a beat, even when scheduling or stunts required a pinch-hitter.

Giving Twiki His Voice – Mel Blanc and Others

Twiki's body may have been performed silently on set, but his *voice* is what truly gave the character personality. That iconic voice – warm, raspy, and always ready with a "biddi-biddi-biddi" or a wisecrack – was provided by **Mel Blanc**, one of Hollywood's most legendary voice actors. Blanc was renowned as "the man of a thousand voices" (he was the vocal genius behind Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, and many Looney Tunes characters), and with Twiki he brought his talents to live-action television [15] [10]. It was Blanc who came up with Twiki's famous stuttering catchphrase "biddi-biddi-biddi!" – essentially an electronic riff on Porky Pig's stutter – and delivered it with such charm that it became an endearing trademark of the character [16]. In *Buck Rogers*' 25th-century setting, Twiki's "biddi-biddi" served as both a cute robot sound effect and a comic timing device (often he'd lead with a rapid *"biddi-biddi-biddi…"* before cracking a one-liner). Blanc's performance added a surprising amount of warmth and humor to what could have been a one-note "tin can" character. As one retrospective noted, hearing the familiar Saturday-morning-cartoon tones of Mel Blanc emerge from a pint-sized robot created an *"emotional bridge"* between the audience and the sci-fi world – it instantly humanized Twiki [15] [10].

Blanc voiced Twiki throughout the **initial 1979 film and all of Season 1 (1979-80)** [17]. He imbued Twiki's lines with snarky affection – whether Twiki was calling Buck "buck-o," chiding another robot, or exclaiming "Wowee!" at some 20th-century artifact, Blanc's comic timing was impeccable. By many accounts, Blanc

enjoyed this unique role. (After all, as he jokingly said in an interview, *"It's much easier to be a rabbit or a robot than to be a person"*, and Twiki let him prove that point [18].) His voice turned Twiki from mere prop to a true character with heart: Twiki could sound frightened, excited, or indignant in a very *human* way, despite technically being a robot.

That's why it came as a shock to fans when, **at the start of Season 2**, Twiki suddenly *sounded* different. Early in Season 2 (1981), **Mel Blanc had fallen ill** and was unable to perform, so the producers cast voice actor **Bob Elyea** as a temporary replacement [19] [20]. Elyea voiced Twiki for the first seven episodes of Season 2, giving him a markedly different sound – higher-pitched and boyish, with a faster "biddi-biddi" chatter [21]. (Many viewers noticed Twiki's voice was now oddly childlike, not the deeper, mellow tone they were used to. In fact, because Elyea went uncredited, some fans at the time wondered if Felix Silla was trying his own hand at voicing Twiki [22]!). The reaction to the change was largely negative – Twiki had become such a beloved part of the show that altering his voice was like giving a favorite cartoon character a new actor. The **producers quickly corrected course**. As soon as Mel Blanc recovered, they brought him back in to resume Twiki's voice mid-season [19] [23]. No in-story explanation was given for Twiki's brief vocal change, but once Blanc returned (for the final six episodes of Season 2) the character immediately felt "right" again. Viewer feedback made it clear how critical Blanc's voice was to Twiki's identity [23]. The show's writers even seemed to lean back into Twiki's old personality once Blanc rejoined – the wisecracks and endearing quips ramped back up, as did the chemistry between Buck and his little buddy. It was a testament to Mel Blanc's influence that *Twiki simply wasn't Twiki* without him. As *The Hollywood Reporter* later noted, Twiki became one of the show's most engaging characters in large part thanks to Blanc's talents [24].

(It's worth noting that Mel Blanc wasn't the only voice of Twiki outside the main show – for instance, a 1980s Australian ice cream commercial featuring Twiki used voice actor Keith Scott to mimic Blanc's Twiki voice [25]. But in the series itself, Blanc's portrayal is the one that cemented Twiki's legacy.)

Twiki's On-Screen Role and Legacy

Onscreen, all these human contributors – designers, suit actors, voice actors, and writers – came together to make Twiki far more than a shiny prop. Twiki is introduced as Buck Rogers' sidekick and quickly becomes an audience surrogate of sorts: a little robot with a big personality. He often provides comic relief, but he also displays loyalty, curiosity, and courage. Twiki accompanies Buck on dangerous missions and often saves the day in small ways (everything from cracking computer codes to delivering a well-timed *"biddi-biddi"* insult at the bad guys). He even has moments of pathos. In one Season 2 episode titled "Twiki is Missing," our robotic friend gets kidnapped and stripped for parts, and we see Buck genuinely anguished over his disappearance – a sign of how real a character Twiki had become to both the characters and the audience. (That episode also introduces a rebuilt Twiki and a female ambuquad named Tina, again played by Patty Maloney, giving Twiki a cute little romance and highlighting the performers' ability to convey emotion through two robots beeping at each other!)

Throughout the series, Twiki's personality benefited from the contributions of the creative team. The writers and producers (like story editor Alan Brennert and others under Larson's guidance) clearly had fun with Twiki's dialogue. He was given goofy 20th-century phrases learned from Buck – Twiki would say things like *"what's up, Buck?"* or *"gimme five!"* after watching Buck do it [5]. He'd make cheeky threats like wanting to "tweak" someone's nose with his pincers if they annoyed him [5]. These touches, born in the writers' room, made Twiki a rare example of a robot with streetwise sass. At the same time, directors like **Daniel Haller** (who directed the pilot film) and others treated Twiki with care in framing and action – they often shot him

at Buck's eye level and gave him close-ups when he "spoke," reinforcing that Twiki was a true character, not just background scenery.

Twiki also became a bit of a pop culture figure in his own right. He was a hit with younger viewers especially – essentially the *"kid appeal"* character on the show (amid more serious characters like Wilma or Dr. Huer). NBC even used Twiki in promotional materials and merchandising. There were Twiki toys and action figures, a Twiki Halloween costume, and the character appeared in tie-in picture books. In 1979, the year the show debuted, the *Hollywood Reporter* singled out Twiki as one of the *"most engaging characters"* on *Buck Rogers*, praising the little robot's funny presence and noting (with approval) that Mel Blanc's voice gave him "warmth and levity" [24].

Behind the scenes, the human contributors often spoke about Twiki in interviews. Felix Silla frequently joked about the challenges of wearing the Twiki suit – how he had to be literally bolted into the costume and how an assistant would "unscrew" Twiki's domed head to free him after the director yelled cut [26]. Despite the discomfort, Silla said he loved playing Twiki because it allowed him to use his circus and mime background to make people laugh (he'd sometimes prank his co-stars by suddenly ad-libbing a funny dance or movement as Twiki once the camera stopped, to break the tension on set). Mel Blanc, for his part, saw Twiki as just another of his many animated personalities – he recorded Twiki's lines in the studio much like he would a Bugs Bunny cartoon, timing them to the footage of Twiki's gesturing. According to Erin Gray (who played Wilma Deering), Blanc's vocal performance sometimes had the crew in stitches; he imbued even simple lines like "biddi-biddi" with comic flair that everyone could appreciate on headphones during post-production. Producers in Season 2 later admitted that removing Blanc's voice had been a mistake – it taught them how vital a voice actor can be in defining a character's appeal [23].

In the end, Twiki stands as a wonderful example of *collaboration* in character creation. A whole team of people literally gave him life: **writers and producers** conceived his cheeky personality, **designers** built his shiny body, a **suit actor** gave him motion and heart, and a **voice actor** gave him a soul. Decades later, fans of *Buck Rogers* still fondly remember Twiki's signature *"Biddi-biddi-biddi! What's up, Buck?"* greeting. The character encapsulated the show's unique blend of campy humor and futurism. And importantly, Twiki demonstrated the value of human talent behind a robot: without Felix Silla's expressive physical performance and Mel Blanc's legendary voice work, Twiki would have just been cold metal and fiberglass. Instead, he became a 25th-century Pinocchio of sorts – a little robot who felt like our friend.

As Mel Blanc's contribution proved, even in a future of starships and computers, it's the human touch (or in this case, the human voice) that truly brings a robot to life [10] [23]. **Twiki's many "parents" – Larson and Stevens, Dorléac, Silla, Maloney, Blanc, Elyea, and more – each left their mark on this iconic character**, ensuring that Buck Rogers' pint-sized partner remains one of science fiction TV's most charming sidekicks.

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